

Here's what stops agriculture sector from being revived

By: Rajesh Shukla | The Financial Express- June 24, 2016

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Sustainable farming is farming “as if people matter.” Existing agricultural systems reflect the traditional economic mentality that the only way to benefit people as consumers is to give them “more inexpensive stuff,” and the only way to benefit people as workers is to give them an opportunity to earn more money. The traditional economic thinking treats people as if they were consuming and producing machines, not living beings with hearts and souls. Agriculture as a way of life, as a lifestyle or as a moral act is treated with disregard by economists—a “demonstrative” thing that has no relevance to real economics.

Nature is inherently diverse. Agro-climatic regions are different, watersheds are different, farms are different, and fields are even more different—both among and within. Each region has a bit different set of best management practices, and some further adjustments are made from farm to farm and field to field. But the fundamental systems of conventional production are all pretty much the same. The most compelling argument in support of sustainable farms is that they must be more “intensively” managed. Wendell Berry puts it succinctly in his book, *What are People For?* “...if agriculture is to remain productive, it must preserve the land and the fertility and ecological health of the land; the land, that is, must be used well. A further requirement, therefore, is that if the land is to be used well, the people who use it must know it well, must be highly motivated to use it well, must know how to use it well, must have time to use it well, and must be able to afford to use it well (p. 147).” Intensive management is possible only if farmers have an intensive relationship with the land—if they know it, care about it, know how to care for it, take time to care for it and can afford to care for it—only if they love it.

Raising agricultural productivity has become a pressing need. Not without reason. For a country that has 90 million households depending on farm income, it is imperative that immediate steps be taken to guarantee this large population segment a sustainable standard of living. Policy-makers are well aware of the huge positive ramifications of this. However, almost all discussions and debates on agricultural productivity focus on cropping patterns, management of resources, supply chain management, and a multitude of issues that do not address the core issue—the households and the individuals who make up this huge population of farmers/cultivators.

There is a mismatch between the way farmers are perceived by policy-makers, media, the general public and reality. While the common perception is that farm or agricultural income is synonymous with farm ownership, the truth is that an overwhelming 63.5% households that report “cultivation” as their major source of income have, at best, tiny unsustainable landholdings. These are the people who are expected to till the land and provide food for a vast nation of one-billion-plus people, while continuing to live in the most underdeveloped conditions with minimal access to resources, amenities and a living standard that borders on the poverty line.

When policy-makers focus attention on the farming community, what they are actually doing is directing resources, subsidies and benefits to the minuscule percentage of farm owners, rather than cultivators

who are responsible for tilling the land, cultivator-tenants and landless agricultural labourers who are the actual farmers.

The current state of tenancy laws and the absence of properly documented land records inhibit all attempts to resuscitate the agricultural sector, plug the loopholes and impact productivity in a meaningful way. Relief targeted at cultivators and those affected by droughts and floods ends up being served to rich landlords. In the absence of proper tenancy documentation, cultivators are denied access to bank credit. For instance, those that are in the greatest need of crop insurance are not able to avail these as these are provided mostly to farmers with outstanding bank loans. The average monthly expenditure for crop production per agricultural household in the country is currently estimated at R2,192 and receipts stand at R5,542. It is unrealistic to assume that given a surplus monthly income of barely R3,350, such a household would even have a bank account. There is enough evidence to prove that those who have access to bank loans are the ones with larger landholdings. Only 15% of landowners with less than 0.01 hectares have outstanding loans (from institutional sources) compared to 79% of large landholders (more than 10 hectares).

One of the primary features of the agricultural scenario in India is the indebtedness of farming households. More than half of all agricultural households (52%) are reeling under debt and the average amount of debt per household is estimated at R47,000. Non-institutional lenders, such as moneylenders, rule the roost and have a 25.8% share of all outstanding loans. There is an urgent need to take corrective measures to provide relief to such households. The consistent rise in farmer suicides shows that government efforts to help distressed farming households are not working. It is ironical that one of the most successful regions of cotton farming—Vidarbha—continues to see rising suicides among cotton farmers. Relief packages that do not take into account the specific situation of the region and distressed households are not going to work. Mismatched benefits and beneficiaries are of no help either—for instance, farmers with no access to sources of water have ended up receiving water pump sets.

The goal of research should be to find need-based solutions to most obvious problems—to find ways to twist, bend and force nature to conform to some universal production and distribution process. There is a mismatch between agricultural extension services and R&D. Basic and strategic research aiding meaningful extension services and productivity has not received a major push in many years and the existing key national agricultural research system has little connect with specific and diverse needs of farming. This adversely impacts innovation and breakthroughs.

In this context, some of the findings of the NSS survey (70th round, 2013) on “Situation Assessment Survey of Agricultural Household” are important to make note of.

About one-fourth of rich Indian agricultural households (owning land over 4 hectares and monthly earnings about R22,000) possessed either BPL or Antyodaya card;

The level of awareness about minimum support price (MSP) is minimal among agricultural households. This has resulted in a minimal share of cooperative and government agencies in total sale, which shows lesser utilisation of these agencies. The major reasons for not selling include non-availability of procurement agency, no local purchaser and better market price over MSP;

Penetration of crop insurance among agricultural households against possible crop loss is negligible. Among the reasons for not insuring crops, lack of awareness was the most prominent one;

Access to modern technology and technical advices by agricultural households is crucial in adopting better agricultural practices for better output. All surveyed agricultural households were asked to report “whether they have accessed any of these agencies for any technical advice,” further asked to rate the usefulness and impact of the advices adopted by them. About 40% of the cultivating households accessed technical help from any of the listed agencies/sources and extension agents such as Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs), agricultural institutes/universities/colleges, private commercial agents, progressive farmers, NGOs and print/electronic media. The distribution of agricultural households having accessed technical advice from any listed source was only 35%, and this was hardly 4% from extension agents and 2.5% from KVKs, both of which were created solely for this purpose.

Thus, Indian agriculture demands an effective extension system that is both context- and solutions-specific—currently uneven and inadequate. As the agriculture scenario has become more complex and diversified, farmers’ access to sources of reliable and relevant information has become increasingly important. We have to identify gaps in information and competencies in emerging areas like secondary agriculture, market-led extension, value addition, climate change, etc.

We need better agriculture that helps build strong relationships among farmers, among consumers, and between farmers and consumers. We need an agriculture that respects the fact that farming is as much a lifestyle as a way to make a living—which life is about, far more than just earning and consuming. We need an agriculture that works in harmony with nature so that people can eat well today, while leaving opportunity for future generations to eat as well as us. We need an agriculture that will support more people in farming, because it takes people who love the agricultural land to take care of the agricultural land, and each farmer can only love so much land. We need an agriculture that contributes to the quality of life of people—physically, socially and economically. We need to learn to farm sustainably. We need to learn to farm “as if people mattered.” What is desperately needed is out-of-the-box thinking with an intense focus on the small and marginal farm owner and the millions who depend on farm-related activities for their livelihood.